

Mental Health Approach: Sharing the Hurts Helps the Healing

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When a congregation member breaks a hip, said the Rev. Bruce Galyon of Central United Methodist Church, "we know what to do: We take them a casserole.

"But if someone were to say in church, 'Pray for my mother; she's going through clinical depression,' the church doesn't know what to do."

Galyon has an answer: Take them compassion.

At the Mental Illness Awareness Coalition's June 23 workshop for the faith and mental-health communities, Galyon will present a session on "The Wounded Healer," based on the 1979 book of the same name by Henri Nouwen. At its essence is the suggestion that people - including health-care providers and clergy - can use their own history to relate to people going through painful experiences.

"So often in the health-care profession, the mental-health profession and in the church, particularly in pastoral care, we try to bring healing to hurts we haven't experienced ourselves - we haven't walked that path," Galyon said. "One of the greatest means of our own healing, of whatever we've experienced, is to help somebody who's going through something similar."

For example, he said, someone who's been through a divorce could offer great comfort to someone going through a divorce: "They may be able to bring more hope, more help, more healing because they understand what's it like."

Even when the experiences are different, he added, one can draw on past hurts to empathize with someone dealing with a hurtful situation.

"Everybody has hurts in their life, of one type or another," he said. "Tapping into our own hurts can help us help other people."

That's opposite conventional wisdom, which has maintained care professionals - including doctors and clergy - should keep an emotional distance, which can cause them to be perceived as cold and distant, Galyon said.

Mental health and its treatment have traditionally been taboo topics in the church, he said.

"There has been a wall created between the mental-health community and the faith community. It's a wall that's created by both groups," he said. "We have traditionally, in the church, said to people who deal with mental-health issues, 'If you'd pray harder, you'll get over this,' or 'If you come to the altar, you'll get over this,' rather than deal with it in much the same way we'd deal with people with diabetes - by realizing they need a professional who understands and deals with these illnesses and issues."

Eliminating that barrier has been the goal of the Mental Illness Awareness Coalition's annual daylong workshop for the faith and mental-health communities, now in its fourth year. Clergy, spiritual leaders, members of church congregations, mental-health professionals, and friends and families of people with mental-health issues are all welcome.

Other topics include "Mental Health 101," an overview of illness and resources, by Stacy Hicks of the Mental Health Association of East Tennessee; "Faith Perspectives on Mental Illness," a panel discussion of Christian, Muslim and Jewish faith leaders, moderated by Chris Buice, senior minister of Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church; "How Can I Start a Support Group?" by Peninsula Behavioral Health therapist Alice Brown; "What Faith Communities Can Do," a panel discussion moderated by Miriam Seylar of Compassion Coalition; and "Suicide: What Everyone Should Know" by G. David Lovette of the Assembly of Episcopal Healthcare Chaplains.

There also will be information booths, and Joe Johnson, president emeritus of the University of Tennessee, will deliver the opening address.

Cost, \$10, includes lunch. Vegetarian lunches are available. To attend, call Stacy Hicks, 865-584-9125, by Friday.